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ABSTRACT

An inservice program for teachers involves a peer group strategy for helping them set goals and experiment with new teaching behaviors. This supportive inservice model proceeds from the premise that meaningful change occurs when the individual perceives a need for change. The major component of this program is a support group of tenured teachers meeting weekly for one school semester. The function of the group is to establish a non-threatening environment where individuals can pose problems and work through possible solutions. Each teacher works in his or her own area of interest. Participants formulate a personal set of priorities by clarifying their own concepts of teacher roles they most identify with. With the help of a visiting consultant, teachers are observed by their peers by means of videotape recordings. The opportunity is given them to evaluate how their own classroom performance measures up to their previously identified priorities and role perceptions. The final element in this process, the generation of a professional improvement plan, is also done within the support group. These plans, similar to ones developed for children in special education, consist of objectives, resources, and activities for the teacher, and timelines for accomplishment. These become the responsibility of each participant once the inservice group completes its work at the end of the semester. (JD)

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DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL IMPROVEMENT PLANS--

A STRATEGY FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

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SP 016 309

ABSTRACT

To empower a third, seventh or twelfth grade teacher to set significant objectives for their own professional improvement is the goal of a staff development model that uses a process consultant removed from the normal evaluative procedures to establish a peer support group within local schools. Within this support group, formed variously of up to ten tenured teachers with an average of fifteen years experience (K-12, all disciplines), participants help each other identify an area for personal development assisted by a cycle of clinical supervision, video tape feedback and the formulation of individualized observational systems. Developing and implementing these improvement plans has implications for supervision, curriculum development and research in the classroom.

The Setting

A first grade teacher wants to know why some activities involve all her students in learning math and others do not; a third grade teacher is puzzled about her habit of running out of time; a seventh grade science teacher wishes to determine why certain lab groups are not working well together; a ninth grade art teacher wants to find ways to help students "think through the materials"; a learning disabilities teacher consultant decides that helping a fourth grade teacher generate viable solutions to a child's learning problem is better than providing all the answers herself; and a twelfth grade English teacher wants to devise alternative curricular opportunities for the "gearheads" (automotive aficionados) in her classroom.

These are examples of the problem areas teachers and supervisors have identified as the result of participating in a staff development program I established within two neighboring school systems in Bergen County, New Jersey. The major component of this program was a support group meeting weekly for one school semester as an inservice offering; the function of this group was to establish a non-threatening environment where individuals might pose meaningful problems and work through possible solutions.

McLaughlin and Marsh (1978) have indicated the effectiveness for teacher growth of support activity groups that supplement skills training sessions and, thereby, help teachers identify immediate classroom concerns confronted in adapting a new program. Such groups are reactive to teachers' problems and the presence of an outside consultant facilitates the development of solutions.

Our peer support groups functioned in a similar fashion over a two-year period with several differences. The teachers and supervisors voluntarily joined for inservice credit in order to generate a professional improvement

plan recently mandated by New Jersey for all tenured teachers. They were not participating to learn how to adapt a new set of pre-determined skills to their classrooms. Rather, they met in order to specify their own priorities and problems, irrespective of district needs and goals. The learning plans created, however, would ultimately complement the district's staff development objectives in reading, math or composition.

The interactive research and development on teaching model (IR&DT) developed by the Far West Laboratory (Tikunoff, 1979) used a similar approach to doing active research in the classroom: they commenced with the immediate concerns of teachers. The major difference is the IR&DT model focused upon one problem and conducted extensive research in that area: e.g., coping with distractions in the primary grades. In our support activity model each teacher worked on his or her own area of interest, although generic competencies such as interpersonal skills were often applicable to several individuals within the group. Both models utilized the resources of local colleges and universities, with the author acting as the process consultant for the support activity group in Bergen County.

Sarason (1971) and many others have indicated the difficulties any change strategy encounters when the needs of those who will implement the proposed innovation are not taken into account. The support activity model proceeds from this premise as well as from another: the only significant change we will undertake is that which we perceive as meaningful. The model further proceeds from the expressed and lived reality of these teachers and supervisors that so much of supervision experienced in public education exemplified the "deficit model" where change is attempted by telling supervisees what is the best practice rather than helping them self-reflect upon their priorities and begin to resolve dilemmas themselves.

Too often this top down model, perpetuated in curriculum development and in instructional practices, fails to identify what is for the teacher "meaningful and doable" (Lieberman and Miller, 1978) and, therefore, so much of supervisory advice goes the way of educational changes that do not take root and result in teacher growth.

The support group, therefore, provides the safe, secure setting within which change can occur, within which teachers experiment, adapt and become more "self-made," as Lortie (1975) suggested.

Potentiating Idiosyncracy

There are several key elements that help teachers and supervisors pose and resolve dilemmas:

1. The generation of individual observation systems
2. A clinical model of supervision
3. Video tape feedback and analysis
4. Research on teacher behavior and learning outcomes
5. Personal goal setting for individual improvement plans

As the support group proceeded each participant was asked to formulate a personal set of priorities developed from his or her model of teaching. Having seen examples of other people's values objectified within a system (e.g., Flanders or Macdonald) they were asked these questions:

1. Describe the role of teacher with which you most identify (or wish to cultivate).
2. Describe what you do within this role, generally.
3. What would an observer see you doing or saying, specifically, while enacting this role in the classroom?

Similar questions were posed about the student's role and the nature of an efficacious learning activity.

Starting with roles in the abstract was not easy for persons with fifteen years experience who perform so many tasks: diagnoser, prescriber, evaluator, manager, stimulator of creating thinking, problem poser, disseminator of information, etc. Eventually, however, each person delineated a role that was most significant at the time and this role was directly related to the problem they wished to work on: thus a seventh grade home economics teacher perceived herself primarily as a manager because she had identified the establishment of good order within the study hall as her target objective for the semester.

This process of establishing priorities and translating them into observable behaviors (e.g., 'the teacher establishes expectations for student behavior . . . teacher exhibits listening, attending and responding behaviors in study hall') was by far the most difficult. There was reluctance and resistance by some to be specific about what a process consultant as well as they themselves could observe while in the performance of various teacher roles. The specter of accountability was ever present and it oftentimes took four months to convince individuals that the final outcome would reflect what they perceived as "meaningful and doable" not what I or the district assistant superintendent perceived as such. Here is where the development of trust and confidence between me and the teachers was vital and the key to that trust was the fact that at no time was material from classroom observations ever shared with local administrators.

The primary purpose of the mini observational designs was to facilitate the major goal of stimulating participants' abilities to self-reflect

upon their teaching and to establish new goals for themselves (see Fig. 1). Rather than mastering someone else's models of teaching (Joyce and Weil, 1972), participants were encouraged to develop their own models, a process I have used over several years with pre-service teachers (Barell, 1977). These designs were then used in the post-observation conferences to help teachers identify strengths, weaknesses, and critical teaching behaviors--e.g., what happens to the young art student's "thinking through the materials" when his teacher answers all questions without involving him or the rest of the class in problem solving?

Specifying elements of one's educational philosophy and then operationalizing them for classroom observation was a process further facilitated by participation in a group with a wide diversity of inputs.

When I observed these teachers in their classrooms or the supervisors in their pre- and post-conferences (at least twice a semester), a model was enacted which, again, focused upon the primary objective of having the person self-reflect upon his or her performance. The model proceeded in this fashion:

1. Ask the teacher to describe objectively what he/she did in the classroom.
2. Have the teacher self-evaluate the performance in accordance with objectives, priorities (within the design) and expectations.
3. Discuss the agenda as initially presented by the teacher and analyze critical episodes.
4. Set objectives for self-improvement.

Obtaining an objective description was necessary so both participants agreed upon what happened and was relatively easy. The difficulty often occurred when teachers of fifteen years experience were asked to self-evaluate. "What's your job isn't it?" they asked. The years of being "done to" hadn't prepared many of them to create an agenda composed of positive and improvable

elements. Often at this point, teachers would lapse into describing what they had done and why--almost like a tenth grader giving a book report by outlining the plot. "I'm not used to this," they continued, and occasionally their comments were more negative than positive. Nevertheless, their perceptions formed the initial agenda for the discussion of critical episodes, and readings related to their specific problem were brought to bear to gain understanding about what affects learning outcomes--e.g., the importance of disciplinary action that does not interrupt the flow of instructional activities (Rutter, 1979).

It is here in the discussion that excellent teachers, which most participants were, also had difficulty because of previous supervisory patterns. When a lesson "went well," the teacher was used to being complimented and hearing the supervisor say, "I have no suggestions." A more meaningful process for the future development of the teacher is to ask why the lesson on the three parts of the brain involved virtually every sixth grader in the health teacher's class. During the course of several discussions this teacher began to become more aware of some of the critical elements: the lessons used meaningful models of the brain; students were challenged to relate content to their own experience; their expectations for her were high and they had the cognitive entry skills requisite for the work (Bloom, 1976); she engaged their imaginative thinking skills and created activities full of challenge, mystery and problem solving so that they assumed the characteristics of good children's toys (Ellis, 1973).

What if a teacher's self-evaluation entirely conflicts with the observer's perception? If there is a video tape, you play back the portion where the reading teacher's goal of establishing and managing two different skill groups shows that she is indeed being very distracted by students asking for directions and spelling corrections. Or you read back a verbatim transcript of a seventh grade literature discussion using "higher order questions" and ask, "What do

you notice about the students' responses?" "They're all monosyllabic and all I keep saying is 'O.K.'" comes the reply. It's difficult to disagree with reality presented in such protocols. Because the teacher has set the goal of involving students in interactive discussions, she perceives the need for more active listening, probing questioning and increased wait time.

The final element in this process, the generation of a professional improvement plan, is also done within the support group. These plans, similar to ones developed for children in special education, consist of objectives, resources, activities for the teacher as well as for the district (which provides support), and timelines for accomplishment. They then become the responsibility of each participant once the inservice group has completed its work at semester's end (see Fig. 2).

Support Linkages

There are a variety of means by which continued support is provided for the participants once they leave the initial group:

1. New and old members are paired in accordance with common objectives: working on interpersonal skills. This involves observations and analyses of audio tapes.
2. Video tapes with critical episodes--e.g., redirecting a student's question on the ages of galaxies to the seventh grade science class for debate--are reused with new members to exemplify significant teacher behaviors.
3. Former members continue to pursue researchable questions generated within the support group: a seventh grade science teacher uses student observers to note behavior within lab groups using a system adapted from Simon and Boyer (1970) and a third grade teacher has launched a qualitative evaluation

of how her students perceive choices in the classroom and on the playground.

4. And, finally, an end of the year inservice activity allows new and former members to share their new concerns and skills with others in the districts.

What are required are more intra-building linkages within one school similar to those established by Goodlad's League of Schools to provide more immediate resources for support.

Implications

There are several implications for such a process:

1. If a process consultant from a local college can facilitate meaningful change by being removed from the evaluative channels, who within the local district can act in such a supportive manner? Perhaps the director of instruction can provide the support services described herein.

2. Teachers of fifteen years experience revealed a strong desire for change, often from teacher-directed models to ones which shared decision making with students. This role-reorientation is one antidote to teacher stress and burn-out, and is in accord with research on adult learning styles.

3. Schools and teacher education programs need to find ways to help educators learn to self-evaluate and to move away from the "deficit models" of supervision and curriculum development. Research indicates that more teacher growth results when teachers are involved in supportive activity groups that focus upon immediate problem solving (McLaughlin and Marsh, 1978).

4. Persons, like institutions, change very gradually and over a long period of time. It is an interactive, slow process that requires much support from within the schools and from outside resources, a process that does not lend itself to didactic strategies.

5. Working within such support groups indicates the feasibility of small groups of teachers within one building--for example, at the department level in secondary schools--proceeding in similar fashions to develop self-improvement plans that might focus upon common skills: interpersonal behaviors or stimulating imaginative thinking.

6. The potential for research and curriculum development is facilitated by such a model because teachers' and supervisors' self-reflection begins to focus upon the fundamentals within the curriculum: choice within the third grade, more abstract thinking opportunities in seventh grade literature and science, and more student self-direction in twelfth grade language arts.

Empowering teachers to develop their own professional improvement plans through self-reflective strategies can, therefore, have significant consequences for supervision, curriculum development and research in the classroom.

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FIG. 1

OBSERVATIONAL DESIGN

Observable Teacher Behavior:

1. Does the teacher ask questions that require the students to use divergent and convergent thinking? How often?

2. Does the teacher pose problems in class activities that cause students to use higher level thinking in the evaluation of possible solutions?

3. In what ways does the teacher arrange students so that they can work in lab teams and interact with each other?

4. Does the teacher provide sufficient time during class for students to complete science activities, with time to investigate other possible solutions to problem solving challenges?

5. In what ways does the teacher direct the students to handle and manipulate equipment, lab aids, and science resource materials during class activities? How often?

6. Does the teacher require the students to measure, observe, classify, infer, hypothesize, and communicate in different science class experiences? Exactly how often is each skill used?

Observable Student Behavior:

1. Do students demonstrate convergent and divergent thinking in class discussions and written work?

2. Do students use the science process skills in their lab interpretations in class activities? How often?

3. In what ways do the students share handling the equipment and the responsibility of recording data during the lab team activities?

4. Do the students' conversation, physical movement, and attention focus on the activity presented to the lab teams?

5. Do the students respond and comment in positive terms toward other students' questions and ideas, without 'killer statements'?

6. Does each student come prepared to class with a science notebook, proper class assignments, and pens or pencils?

Observable Behavior Provided by Learning Activities:

1. Do the class activities provide the students and teacher with the opportunity to become physically and mentally involved with science investigations? In what ways?

2. How do the class activities require the students and teachers to use communication skills, listening skills, study skills, science process skills, and problem solving skills?

3. Do the class activities initiate interaction between the students and teacher and important curriculum objectives? In what ways?

4. Do the activities allow the teacher and students to exchange roles as 'demonstrators of science activities' and 'observers of science activities'?

5. Do the class activities and lessons allow the students and teachers to choose different activities according to their personal preferences, interests, and current scientific events?

6. Do the learning activities provide the students and teachers with the chance to present and solve problems for the rest of the class using inquiry and problem solving techniques?

Professional Improvement Plan FIG. 2

Tim Lucas

Benjamin Franklin Junior High School

I. Overall Objectives

To stimulate and improve the levels of imaginative thinking of students.

To improve the quality of students working together in small task groups.

II. Resources

A. Maccia, G. "Hypothetical Thinking in Education."

B. Hallman, R. "Principles of Creative Thinking."

C. Macdonald, J. "A Study of Openness in Classroom Interactions."

D. Barell, J. "Combinatory Play in Science." Playgrounds of Our Minds.

E. Carin and Sund, Developing Classroom Questioning Strategies.

F. Cooper, J. Classroom Teaching Skills. Chapter on Management.

G. Simon and Boyer, Mirrors of Behavior.

H. Torrance, E. P. Thinking Creatively with Words. (Test)

III. Learning Activities

A. Consult literature to determine ways of assessing levels of imaginative thinking. Using Torrance or other measurement, determine base-line information on students' imaginative thinking abilities and establish target objectives for academic year.

B. Construct learning activities which focus upon providing imaginative stimuli for students; provide means of obtaining feedback on children's progress toward specific objectives, i.e., improving fluency, flexibility or originality.

C. Maintain for each student a profile of imaginative thinking capabilities.

D. Using observational systems in Simon and Boyer create and/or adapt an observational system of your own which will help assess kinds of small group interaction which does occur during science classes. Initially, focus upon groups identified previously as spending excessive amounts of time in "off-task" behavior. Use feedback to determine nature of interaction for one or more groups and to devise means of improving the situation.

E. Utilize services of supervisory personnel to obtain continuous feedback on progress toward specific improvement objectives.

F. Discuss with students your observations and enlist their suggestions for improvement; consider utilizing their observational skills to obtain feedback on other groups within the class as well as upon their own individual attention to the task.

IV. District Responsibility

A. Responsible supervisor should focus upon these priorities after consultation with you. Observations and conferences can be utilized to focus upon obtaining feedback and designing activities for improvement of levels of imaginative thinking and on-task performance.

B. Provide release time upon occasion during the year to observe in others' classrooms.

C. Provide access to District's professional library.

D. Provide opportunities to meet with persons skilled in classroom observations as well as with peers concerned with similar problems.

V. Time: Academic Year 1980-81.